

**Town of *Dunstable* Selectboard**  
**Meeting Minutes**  
**October 26, 2021**  
**Meeting Held via Zoom**

*This meeting was held virtually through Zoom, Zoom ID 876 7143 2909*

**Convened:** 6:00 pm

**Present:** Leah D. Basbanes, chair, Kieran D. Meehan, vice chair, Ronald J. Mikol, member(s); Brian M. Palaia, Town Administrator; James W. Dow, Chief of Police; Shawn Murray, Fire Chief; Harold Simmons, Advisory Board; Joan Simmons, Planning Board; Patrick Kerrigan, Captain Fire Dept.; Rafael Cabanas, Corey Morin, and Mike Gavin, Fire Dept.; Paul Zbikowski

**Call to Order & Public Forum**

Ms. Basbanes called the meeting to order. She then noted this meeting has a very light agenda which really only includes Appointments, and an Interview with a Possible Interim Fire Chief Candidate.

**Interview with Interim Fire Chief Candidate**

Mr. Zbikowski introduced himself as a retired Fire Chief for Ashburnham. He also teaches business at Fitchburg State University. He felt that this would be a great challenge for him. Ashburnham is a little bigger than Dunstable with about 6,000 residents. He also was an Interim Chief in Berlin. It was supposed to be six months, but he ended up serving there for 3 years. He isn't interested in serving that long again given the constraints on his retirement. But he is willing to assist the town for a period. Certainly for the 8 months that Dunstable is currently looking for. He then detailed the challenges in Berlin that he faced and how he addressed them. When he left the problems were mostly in the rearview mirror. He can't guarantee that he can do the exact same in Dunstable, but certainly he'll do his best. He is aware the town is considering regionalization ideas including with Pepperell and Groton. He noted if we are serious he would work with the regional planning commission. It can cost \$30,000 or more to do studies on regionalization. Further, Groton is in a different planning group than Dunstable. So that would also pose a coordination challenge. The Board noted the department's volunteer nature and asked Mr. Zbikowski about his experience thereof. Mr. Zbikowski explained he started in Ashburnham as an on call volunteer firefighter and was the first full time firefighter. Berlin was also all call when he arrived and he helped them move to *per diem* and then a few full time. All departments are facing challenges in this area. He knows the ins and outs of this, but there is no magic ball. Each department and town is unique. The Board then asked if he has an existing affiliation with the department. Mr. Zbikowski noted he hasn't. The most he's had contact with the department previously was retirement parties for folks like Chief Charlie Rich. The Board then asked about mutual aid and asked how that would work and how response times would be. Mr. Zbikowski responded that he could get into Dunstable relatively quickly as he can respond with lights and come through Ashby, Townsend, and so forth. He felt confident he could respond in about 30 minutes which is not far off the response for Chief Murray coming from Hudson. Still, he emphasized that training is important so that the firefighters can respond initially and he can join them.

Further with mutual aid, other departments can help and temporary command can be taken by another Chief if need be in a pinch. The Board felt that the real concern is the training and response. Mr. Zbikowski reminded he's always been a working Chief and he would keep tuned into the radio and would always be listening. He would respond day, night, and weekend. That's just part of the normal and not something he's worried about. The Board noted that Dunstable is a small town and the department is very much woven into the community with a high rate of participation in community events. Many of which are unique and which the citizens expect to see continue. The Firefighters Association is healthy and does sponsor and support a lot of that. Mr. Zbikowski responded by outlining what he used to do in Ashburnham including various events around holidays like Thanksgiving and anniversary celebrations. He agreed that it's important for departments to have that connection and noted that it is the "fun stuff" to do. The Board stressed that we need to take care of the department and the community. We've lost some of that fun in the past few years. Mr. Zbikowski responded that he's interested in the job. He won't be someone who will just come and sit on his hands in his office all day. He will be hands on. There was then a question about where small town departments are going. Mr. Zbikowski responded that he can't speak for Dunstable as of yet, but overall it isn't rosy. Volunteerism isn't what it used to be. People come to town and live there and they want to have their kids in the schools, but there isn't the volunteerism that there used to be. It's worse with fire. The commitment is responding at 2 am. It's training all weekend. Every town is different, but

*Approved and adopted on 11/9/21*

sadly it's going away because of the cultural shift. He then stressed that most departments don't rely on volunteers heavily. Mr. Palaia agreed noting that most don't, a few others like Parks & Recreation might rely on Commissioners who volunteer and oversee things. But most have employees and administrative support. Mr. Zbikowski agreed and reminded that the pandemic hasn't helped either. He then asked the Board to consider, if they hire him, putting together a list of goals and desired results for him to work on. Mr. Palaia agreed to put that together. The main things are the regionalization study and the ambulance service improvement we're looking for. Also we want to try and preserve the gains of Chief Murray for the department. We may still lose people, but we want to keep the people we have and to replace anyone who leaves with new talent. There's also equipment that needs to be maintained and replaced and the like. The Board agreed and noted a few creative ideas for the Fire Station are probably in order. The Board finished by thanking Mr. Zbikowski and noting that he has an impressive biography and thanked him for his interest.

### **Appointments & Resignations**

The Board began by noting there is one appointment for the 350<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebration Committee, and for the appointment of an Interim Fire Chief. The Board noted for the Anniversary Celebration Committee, the committee is already seeing turnover. This isn't necessarily bad but the Board had some thoughts mostly about whether the committee was meeting regularly and functioning. Mr. Voelker reported they're meeting monthly and have a chair and so forth. He further agreed to procure minutes from them for the town's website. It was also agreed that Mr. Meehan would be the Board's liaison to the Anniversary Celebration Committee. Mr. Palaia noted that the Interim Fire Chief appointment was only placed on the agenda in the event the Board determined it wished to make an appointment after the interview, but may be dispensed with should the Board wish to consider any other candidates. The Board felt after the interview that it was comfortable with proceeding with the appointment of Mr. Zbikowski. It was agreed that he would assume command on November 12<sup>th</sup> after having some overlap that would begin previously on November 9<sup>th</sup>.

Nicole Tully appointed as a member of the 350<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebration Comm. Term Expires Dec. 31<sup>st</sup>, 2023  
*Motion by Mr. Mikol, second by Mr. Meehan, passed unanimously*

Paul Zbikowski as Interim Fire Chief Term Expires June 30<sup>th</sup>, 2022  
*Motion by Mr. Meehan, second by Mr. Mikol, passed unanimously*

### **Town Administrators Report**

Mr. Palaia reported that we continue to have problems getting EEA to sign off on the Rt. 113 legislation. Senator Kennedy was able to get a response which was merely an apology for no response to date. But there's been no other response. He's asked DOT to make their own ask. In the meantime he's asking Senator Kennedy to continue pressing. We've jumped through so many hoops all year with multiple town meetings and votes thereof and now we're hung up here. This is crazy and we only have another 6 weeks given timetables from the federal government. He then turned to the inter-municipal agreement with Pepperell for water operator services. It appears likely that the town will enter into such an agreement and that it will be cost effective for the Water Dept. The Board was very pleased by the news. Mr. Palaia then turned to the ambulance talks with Pepperell. We obtained the data we needed from Trinity for Pepperell and they're pleased given how high our private insurance is for ambulance services. He then turned to regionalization study opportunities to study talk with Groton. We can't apply for grant funds under the community compact agreement, at least not until after the New Year. How fast the study can be done is unknown. Still, he reported on the vision from Groton's Fire Chief is that it be 24/7. So we'd have to take the current budget and multiply it by 6 or 7. If that's the mission we can't do it as soon as FY23. But if we can get the ambulance service with Pepperell that will help and possibly allow the freedom to pursue Groton further. The Board noted that Groton has ambulance so they could possibly do that too in a tie up. Mr. Cabanas then interjected to note some concerns he has as a firefighter regarding things happening. We have graduated a lot of people from the Fire Academy and they are folks who work hard. He asked why the town hasn't issued more public statements relating to what is going on in the department stressing the work the department has done. Mr. Palaia responded that he understands and appreciates those concerns. There have been meetings held with the department. Including with Chief Murray and firefighters as well as with the new Interim Chief Zbikowski who met with some of the senior members. He stressed that Chief Zbikowski is very qualified and will continue the hard work of Chief Murray. Mr. Cabanas also had some concerns with this hiring process being so fast.

Mr. Palaia responded that given the timetables the Board was under some pressure to hire quickly. But certainly that wasn't intended to appear rushed or anything. Mr. Cabanas expressed trust that Chief Zbikowski is qualified and will do well, but felt that more needs to be done going forward for the department. Mr. Palaia noted some of the recent struggles including with social media which has unfortunately resulting in this current situation for the department and

the Board did make public comments in defense of the Fire Dept. and of Chief Murray. There are a couple of critical citizens in town who will likely always be critical, and we can't stop that, but it should be understood that the majority of citizens, departments, and the Board itself appreciate the department. We must all do the best we can to work together and to work through differences. The Board noted that it appreciates these questions and concerns. Still the Board stressed that it is far more aware of what's going on in the department than may be realized. The Board members frequently talk to various members of the department. Like many others the Board members are volunteers and have other commitments. The Board stressed that it empowers the Chief to lead and generally follows the Chiefs advice. The last few years have in some ways been tough, but things are improving. Chief Murray did a lot and the Board is confident that Chief Zbikowski will build on that. The Board stressed it is absolutely behind the Fire Dept. Still there is a command structure. That said the Board reminded that individual firefighters are always welcome at its meetings. Mr. Palaia suggested a meeting could be held again with the department, himself, and a member of the Board. Mr. Palaia then returned to his report. The Treasurer/Collector is retiring in August of 2022. The Board expressed some sadness to see her go. She is one of the best employees and has served the town for over 30 years. Mr. Palaia agreed and suggested depending on the timing of the Town Clerk legislation request that would make that department appointed, it might be possible for the jobs to be combined. That could result in a substantial coverage increase, especially with one or two assistants if we do some restructuring internally. All of that said he wasn't certain that would all happen in a timely fashion, but it is something to keep in mind. The Board generally agreed with the idea. Mr. Palaia suggested that it doesn't have to be this exact configuration. Right now the Treasurer/Collector is part time at 24-25 hours a week and the Town Clerk is only 20 hours a week. A change in structure could see the combined job be full time.

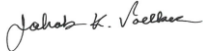
## **Minutes**

The Board reviewed the minutes for October 12<sup>th</sup>, 2021. Upon review the Board determined to approve the minutes.

A motion was made by Mr. Mikol to approve the minutes of October 12<sup>th</sup>, 2021, as written. The motion was seconded by Mr. Meehan and passed unanimously.

A motion to adjourn was made by Mr. Meehan at 7:06 pm. The motion was seconded by Mr. Mikol and passed without objection.

Respectfully submitted by



Jakob K. Voelker, Assistant Town Administrator